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ABSTRACT

A study examined literacy professionals' interest in gender issues in literacy education. A total of 1,519 K-12 teachers; reading specialists; teacher educators in reading, language arts, and related fields; library media specialists; and school administrators who make policy decisions related to literacy education completed a survey. Results indicated that: (1) 87% of respondents identified themselves as White/Caucasian/European American, and 82% supported an eclectic approach to literacy instruction that combines basic skills with whole language; (2) 85% were somewhat to very interested in knowing about gender issues in literacy education; and (3) 52% thought that the behavior of boys and girls is determined by biological/physiological determinants as well as sociocultural factors. Responses to seven teaching scenario items indicated that educators were least enthusiastic about the scenario that called for discussions of sexist language, the scenario where a non-traditional school text was used to examine how males and females are portrayed, and the scenario that encouraged boys and girls to identify with characters of their sex during a class discussion. Two of the four scenarios that educators preferred do not deviate from what is commonly viewed as appropriate curriculum for middle and high school teaching. The remaining two scenarios were found acceptable to many educators: monitoring equal participation by males and females in discussions and including the works of those men and women considered non-mainstream in the curriculum. (Contains three tables of data.) (RS)

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Educators' Stances Toward Gender Issues in Literacy

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This presentation reports survey questionnaire data collected on literacy professionals' interest in gender issues in literacy education. By literacy professionals we mean K-12 teachers, reading specialists, teacher educators in reading, language arts amd related fields, library media specialists, and school administrators who make policy decisions related to literacy education. The gender questions were a subset of 99 items surveying literacy professionals' ways of knowing and teaching practices (Commeyras, DeGroff, Stanulis, & Hankins, 1997). The survey was conducted to further investigate results from the National Reading Research Center's strand of eight highly contextualized studies that investigated how literacy professionals' gain knowledge that affects their teaching practices. One of the eight was a study of ways that university- and school-based teachers might begin to alter or interrupt discursive practices that have in the past permitted inequities in classroom talk about text to go unexamined and unchanged (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall & Hinson, 1997). Based on findings from that study the researchers designed 9 forced-choice questionnaire items to investigate attitudes towards teaching that focuses on gender issues in literacy education. The survey results for the gender items are the focus of this paper presentation.

Method/Data Sources

The questionnaire items on gender were constructed to investigate respondents: a) interest in knowing about gender issues; b) views regarding the extent to which gender differences are biologically or socially determined; and c) attitudes toward teaching scenarios that addressed gender issues (see attached for items used).

The design of the study called for a national mail probability sample, and a 4-wave mail out procedure. The sampling procedures were designed to insure that all literacy professionals nationally had a near equal chance of being selected for inclusion in the sample. The sample was drawn by Market Data Retrieval, Inc. Of Shelton, Ct., a company specializing in education related marketing services. Random samples were drawn of school principals, library media specialists, reading specialists, Middle and High School English teachers, K-6 elementary school teachers, and teacher educators in reading/language arts. The provision of equal opportunity of selection is a necessary requirement if probability sample is to be obtained. Bias in response is also minimized, and inferences about the national population of literacy professionals can be made from the results obtained in the survey.

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Results/Conclusions

Questionnaires were completed and returned by 1,519 literacy professionals. There were significantly more respondents that reported being female (n=1290) than male (n=208). The majority of the respondents identified themselves as White/Caucasian/European American (87%) and they support an eclectic approach to literacy instruction that combines basic skills with whole language (82%). The respondents varied significantly with regard to the number of years they had been employed in education. Respondents had from 1 to 51 years of experience with a median of 20 years of employment in education. Almost half (47%) of the respondents indicated having earned a masters degree. The other half were divided between those with a bachelor degrees (28%) and those with either a specialist or doctoral degree (23%).

Results for all literacy professionals reveal that the majority (85%) are somewhat to very interested in knowing about gender issues in literacy education. More than half of respondents (52%) think that the behavior of boys and girls is determined by biological/physiological determinants as well as sociocultural factors.

The responses to the seven teaching scenario items that focused on gender issues reveal that literacy professionals were more likely to imagine themselves engaging in some than others. Educators were least enthusiastic about: a) the scenario that called for discussions of sexist language; b) the scenario where a non-traditional school text (Archie comic books) was used to examine how males and females are portrayed; and c) the scenario that encouraged boys and girls to identify with characters of their sex during a class discussion. The least favored scenarios focus more explicitly on gender than do the other four scenarios. They might think that it is potentially controversial to explicitly draw students into discussions of sexist language, comic book portrayals of males and females, and same-sex identification with fictional characters.

Two of the four scenarios that educators preferred do not deviate from what is commonly viewed as appropriate curriculum for middle and high school teaching. Reading To Kill a Mockingbird and reading a story of a solitary self-sufficient woman are acceptable school-type texts. The discussion ideas presented for each text seem less likely to lead to divisive discussions. One can imagine a discussion of what it was like for Atticus Finch to be a man in the 1930s that would not offend or threaten the comfort zones of both students and their teachers. Although, one African American reading specialist who was "very interested" in gender issues wrote that she would change "man" to "black man."

Thinking of questions to ask the solitary independent woman does not obviously lead to divisive talk between the sexes or to issues of sexism. One can imagine posing questions that seemingly have little to do with gender. The perception that these two teaching scenarios are less likely to lead to controversial discussions might account for the fact that 90-94% of respondents said they "might" or "would very much like" to engage in these kind of instructional experiences.

We propose a different explanation for the remaining two scenarios that many educators found acceptable. One scenario focuses on monitoring equal participation by males and females in discussions and the other scenario proposes including the works of those men and women considered non-mainstream in the curriculum. More than 80% of respondents said they "might" or "would very much like" to do these things. Unlike the other two popular scenarios these two do not represent traditionally sanctioned teaching or curricular ideas. Rather, they reflect recent trends and movements within education. The scenario on monitoring participation in class discussions represents the new consciousness that teachers should provide gender-equity in the classroom (American Association of University Women, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The idea of including minority and "Third World" writers in the curriculum represents the impact of multicultural education movement. Much has been written in recent years about the importance of addressing issues of cultural diversity in education and educators' acceptance of the scenario on including "in the curriculum the writings, ideas, and accomplishments of women and men not considered part of the mainstream" represents the influence of that educational movement.

References

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Table 1. Interest in Gender Issues

How interested are you in knowing about gender issues in literacy education?	TCH K-2	TCH 3-5	TCH 6-8	TCH 9-12	ADM	RDG SPC	LMS	TCH EDU	ALL
Not interested	15.65	19.03	17.51	13.45	17.35	7.55	11.16	6.76	13.94
Somewhat interested	36.26	31.98	26.27	30.25	26.53	41.51	33.49	23.67	31.14
Interested	35.11	33.20	39.17	35.29	30.61	33.02	33.02	36.71	34.87
Very interested	12.98	15.79	17.05	21.01	25.51	17.92	22.33	32.85	20.05

Table 2. Determinants of Behavior

The behavior of boys and girls is primarily determined by ...		TCH K-2	TCH 3-5	TCH 6-8	TCH 9-12	ADM	RDG SPC	LMS	TCH EDU	ALL
Biological and physiological determinants	1	1.18	0.40	1.39	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.48
	2	4.31	2.43	6.48	2.54	3.16	4.85	3.79	2.45	3.80
	3	59.22	58.70	47.69	51.69	51.58	61.17	51.66	45.59	53.42
	4	30.20	28.74	38.43	40.68	42.11	31.07	39.81	43.63	36.16
Social and cultural determinants	5	5.10	9.72	6.02	5.08	3.16	2.91	4.74	8.33	6.14

Table 3. Gender and Teaching Scenarios

Assume you are a middle or high school teacher. How likely is it that you would engage in the following teaching scenarios?	TCH K-2	TCH 3-5	TCH 6-8	TCH 9-12	ADM	RDG SPC	LMS	TCH EDU	ALL
Select a passage from a short story and ask students to examine it for sexist language									
Would never do this	17.37	17.81	12.27	2.52	7.37	8.74	9.26	3.92	11.14
Unlikely to do this	27.03	27.13	25.91	22.69	33.68	29.13	26.39	15.69	25.43
Might do this	39.38	40.49	43.18	57.14	47.37	47.57	43.52	48.04	44.50
Very much like to do this	16.22	14.57	18.64	17.65	11.58	14.56	20.83	32.35	18.93
Have students read Archie comic books to find out what messages the text and illustrations communicate about males and females									
Would never do this	10.04	14.11	11.87	10.08	5.26	8.82	12.50	6.90	10.54
Unlikely to do this	31.66	29.84	31.05	26.89	36.84	31.37	26.39	21.67	29.02
Might do this	42.08	39.11	42.47	52.94	48.42	43.14	44.91	41.87	43.39
Very much like to do this	16.22	16.94	14.61	10.08	9.47	16.67	16.20	29.56	17.04

Table 3. Gender and Teaching Scenarios (con't)

Assume you are a middle or high school teacher. How likely is it that you would engage in the following teaching scenarios?	TCH K-2	TCH 3-5	TCH 6-8	TCH 9-12	ADM	RDG SPC	LMS	TCH EDU	ALL
Have students read an excerpt from Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird and ask students to think about what it meant to be a man in the 1930's									
Would never do this	2.70	2.82	4.09	0.85	1.05	0.99	1.39	1.97	2.26
Unlikely to do this	10.81	8.87	8.64	0.85	6.32	4.95	9.26	7.39	7.95
Might do this	49.81	52.02	46.82	45.76	51.58	55.45	51.85	43.35	49.32
Very much like to do this	36.68	36.29	40.45	52.54	41.05	38.61	37.50	47.29	40.48
Have students read about a woman who builds a cabin and lives a solitary life in the woods and then think of questions that you would like to ask her									
Would never do this	1.16	0.81	1.83	0.00	1.05	0.00	1.85	1.97	1.23
Unlikely to do this	5.41	5.65	4.57	4.24	3.16	2.91	6.02	6.40	5.13
Might do this	47.10	46.77	44.75	57.63	54.74	45.63	54.17	37.93	47.71
Very much like to do this	46.33	46.77	48.86	38.14	41.05	51.46	37.96	53.69	45.93

Table 3. Gender and Teaching Scenarios (con't)

Assume you are a middle or high school teacher. How likely is it that you would engage in the following teaching scenarios?	TCH K-2	TCH 3-5	TCH 6-8	TCH 9-12	ADM	RDG SPC	LMS	TCH EDU	ALL
Encourage discussion in which girls identify with female characters and boys with male characters									
Would never do this	5.43	6.05	7.34	5.08	4.21	5.83	7.51	9.50	6.61
Unlikely to do this	31.01	29.44	32.11	39.83	28.42	33.98	35.21	36.50	33.04
Might do this	45.74	50.40	42.20	40.68	53.68	38.83	44.13	34.50	43.84
Very much like to do this	17.83	14.11	18.35	14.41	13.68	21.36	13.15	19.50	16.52
Monitor whether male and female students participate equally in class discussions of reading assignments									
Would never do this	3.47	2.86	3.64	1.71	1.05	0.97	2.31	0.99	2.40
Unlikely to do this	13.13	12.24	13.64	13.68	9.47	15.53	15.28	7.39	12.55
Might do this	46.72	49.39	41.36	45.30	51.58	46.60	49.07	39.90	45.95
Very much like to do this	36.68	35.51	41.36	39.32	37.89	36.89	33.33	51.72	39.09

Table 3. Gender and Teaching Scenarios (con't)

Assume you are a middle or high school teacher. How likely is it that you would engage in the following teaching scenarios?	TCH K-2	TCH 3-5	TCH 6-8	TCH 9-12	ADM	RDG SPC	LMS	TCH EDU	ALL
Include in the curriculum the writings, ideas, and accomplishments of women and men not considered part of the mainstream									
Would never do this	2.70	2.82	2.29	0.85	0.00	0.97	0.46	0.98	1.64
Unlikely to do this	11.97	13.31	11.47	6.78	8.42	5.83	9.26	5.39	9.72
Might do this	48.26	51.21	45.87	48.31	47.37	54.37	53.24	36.27	47.84
Very much like to do this	37.07	32.66	40.37	44.07	44.21	38.83	37.04	57.35	40.79